LESBIAN BOAT RIDE

The plum velvet skirt is still hanging in my closet, patiently waiting to be perked up a bit and taken out for another whirl. I wear it with a transparent blouse etched with flowers that I have pieced together from a spring dress I stopped wearing because it was too femme. I am toughening myself up and learning to do battle. Dresses would not do any longer. But the evening of the boat ride I feel like celebrating my body. It does bother me a little that I am one of the few women wearing a skirt, but I wanted soft material to caress me, not clasp me tightly. Others are dressed up in military uniforms, jump suits, carpenters' pants, jeans with the blue scrubbed out of them.

Five hundred of us come out that night for this was to be the big event of our season, an important ritual in our expanding history. Five hundred outrageous lesbians come together for a night of sailing on a chartered ship up the never-never land of the Hudson River to Bear Mountain, imagining the boat's magical disappearance at midnight so that we will never have to return again to a cement city filled with too many obtuse men.

We depend upon our combined powers to make something unexpected occur. Four hours can contain a ceremonial passage away from the institutions of the man and into the body of ourselves. An event no one can tabloid. Who knows what might happen? A storm might come up on the Jersey shore to help us. We might be stranded and have to set up camp with only our wits and jackets for cover. We have baskets of luscious fruits,

pungent cheeses and fierce desires. We have husky wines, piercing words, tender caresses and the need for adventures that aren't watered down. We want the real thing, real, earthy romance. More real than Moby Dick and Captain Ahab. More real than Jesus Christ and Judas Iscariot. More expressive of our natures. We aren't out to murder a whale or a man; we are out to discover ourselves and a world we believe in.

That night anything is possible. Everyone is excited. I am self conscious about my skirt but no one else seems to even notice it, except Hera and a guy on the boat crew. All that matters is that I make it aboard.

I am still aroused from the afternoon. Mari has moved in with me earlier that day and we have made love. Afterwards we watched a rose do a sweet little dance for us in its vase. We were high on each other.

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Today I would not have left her for the pleasure of that other outing. I would have stayed with her to fully enjoy the delicious blending from a full encounter where both give, both receive. But I have planned this journey with my friends for weeks in advance, before I even knew Mari existed. All the tickets had been sold long before. And I am committed to creating a culture with those familiar to me. Besides, I am young and positive that all of New York City's lesbia will be aboard.

Mari said: "You need your sisters just like I need mine," and pushed me out the door.

I didn't want to see the moistness flooding her eyes. Yes, I confess that I never opened myself to her completely when I was with her. Only when she is on the other side of the world again do I really commit my heart to her. Only when I can not reach out and touch her can I say, "Mari, I am deeply in love with you," and voice my deepest need to know another woman and thus affirm my own true woman self.

I am being eased firmly towards the dance floor of the excursion boat. No one bothers to ask for my consent. All the hips, hands, buttocks, breasts going that way assume I want to go

there too. I am powerless to stop the momentum.

"Looks like you're going to be part of the action, Baby," I say, clinching my jaw and feeling rather pinched. "None of this standing on the sidelines and eyeing the girls tonight."

Occasionally a familiar shape slips by; the lips of Janice, the pointed ears of Doe, the lanky, friendly body of Justine, the heavy eyes of Lorraine, the solid frame of Violet. The familiar parts of women I have known swirl into the dancing bodies of strangers. Yet, all seem familiar beyond words. Familiar, I guess, because we are all cast from the same mold.

When I am nearly at the center of the dance area, I decide to claim a small parcel of floor by digging in with my polished, black, Frye boots hiding under my skirt. Everywhere I look I see bracelets and rings, buttons and caps dancing to the blasting music of a rock and roll singer. Wrapped in a silver snake of a dress, the singer balances on shockingly high heels.

Doesn't it matter to anyone here that she is singing a love song to a guy? Or does everyone just fasten on her lively, sensual body? I for one am tired of hearing *he* instead of *she* and tonight especially *he* scratches at my ear drum. This night is supposed to be for us.

My resistance to this hard-hitting, liquor drinking music is being threatened by the wonderful feel of body after body rubbing against me. Then someone grabs my shoulders.

"Hey, Bird! What are you doing standing there all alone? Come on. Let's dance."

Six feet of chunky woman beams down on me. I'm surprised Hera's so friendly—just last week she snubbed me at the Priestess Bar where she works as a bouncer. I don't think she trusts me. I'm less flamboyant about my lesbianism than she is. She's a hard-core political, practically organized the Rape Crisis Center in the Village by herself.

"Hera! You are stunning" I shout over the loud music.

"Do you like it? I rented it at ten bucks for the night." She winks as if I'm supposed to grasp some subtlety of meaning, but I don't.

She is dressed in full captain's regalia from hat to boots and

flashes with medals. Her straight, short hair clings to her face from sweat. She looks good. I'm inspired to place both my hands on her waist. Besides, if I don't I'll lose her.

She seems glad that I've reached out to her and responds by placing her large hands on my shoulders. I'm surprised, but she almost seems shy about looking into my eyes.

"Heard you play last week at the Teahouse, Bird," she winks again. "I was fascinated but I didn't get it. You know, you're kinda weird!"

Her comment puts heat in my cheeks. For the second time she calls me by the name I use when I give a concert. I would like to walk away from her but I am pinned against her. "Thanks for the compliment." I have to shout again because of the din.

She looks startled. What does she expect? A hound dog look?

"Do you know what weird means, Hera?" Of course she doesn't. The Super Dyke.

"It used to mean peculiar, strange," she says. "Did you invent a new meaning?"

"It might mean that to you, but not to me," I say, ignoring a sarcastic tone.

Better be careful. I'm walking on eggshells. I know very well that my manner stinks of college and middle class. Hera's smells of factories and workers. Mari has been raising my consciousness about the subtleties of class differences. She says sometimes I talk like I had caviar in my mouth. But I've been on unemployment, even on welfare. For all I know Hera has money in the bank which I never had. Maybe she even owns a car and maybe she went to college too.

The dance floor tilts and I feel slightly nauseated. Hera doesn't seem to be bothered at all by the rocking floor. Obviously, she wants to get my goat. She must think I am an easy tease. It's not so much what she says but the way she says it. I know her crowd has pegged me *mystical* which to them is a dirty word. They probably get a big laugh from my images of women flying into the center of the full moon. Well, I won't be put down by other people's ignorance and fear.

Suddenly Hera, who has been dancing with her eyes closed, gives me a direct look and flicks me round, almost half circle. What's going on here? I feel like I'm her hot potato.

Enormous hands come down again on my shoulders. I pull away and rock in front of her.

I'm shouting, "If you trace the etymology of weird, Hera, you'll find it comes from the root *wer*, related to the words wrist, ring, writhe, wreathe, and other words which suggest circular motion. Weird really means to bend and turn with the motion of the earth. And when you move in *natural* rhythms," I emphasize the word *natural,* "you can control your own fate because you're connected to your own powers. You are a wise woman, a witch. Get it? That's what weird means to me."

I feel proud of myself. I have not let her intimidate me.

She whistles through her teeth, still pumping in beat to the music."Sure it means all that, kid? I never said you weren't creative, imaginative, brilliant and even sexy though you try to hide it."

I don't know what to think of her. I hope she doesn't wink at me again. I don't share any secrets with her.

"I just said you were weird, meaning a bit vague. You work with metaphors and I work with facts, hard facts. Women in trouble. How come you're so defensive, baby?"

"Listen, Hera, I respect your work." Why don't I remind her that baby is a sexist word when applied to a woman? "I just want you to see the importance of what I do too."

"Take it easy, honey."

"Has anyone ever said you were weird before? I bet your sister, your brother, someone got your goat by calling you weird."

A small, energetic woman jabs me with her elbow. I shoot her with a sharp look.

"Now that you ask me, Bird...," she dips and gyrates, "...yes, I remember one time in grade school. I was about thirteen I think." I feel my shoulders relax a notch. "I gave my teacher, Miss Figara, a present, a small wooden knife that I'd carved. You didn't know that I was an artist too, I bet. She was really moved by the gift, but when I walked out of her room into the hallway

there was this kid, Georgie Ortiz, waiting for me. What a mean puss he had. I can remember him saying to me, 'Weirdo likes the teacher,' something like that. I should have beaten him up. But I was too shaken. It's funny Bird, but you know, everytime I give a friend a special little gift, at least something I think is special, I'm still afraid somebody is going to laugh at me. " She actually looks like she could cry.

I suppress a distinct urge to comfort her. Where is she going now?

"Wait, Hera. I just want to say that the next time somebody calls you weird, just tell them what it really means, will you? And could you try to be less critical of me?" I can't stop tears flushing my eyes.

"Okay, baby, I hear you. You're okay. In fact, you are darn right gorgeous. I like your almond eyes. What say we go up on deck now and have a beer in the moonlight, teach. I've learned my lesson." Her whole face twinkles into a pleasant smile. Thank God she doesn't wink again. She salutes me and we laugh.

"I'd love a beer, captain."

We push our way to the sidelines. Again I'm aware of her height. Two women leave their seats as we approach—they seem to be moving on cue—giving us just enough room to squeeze between several others resting there.

"Okay, Bird." Hera lets out a giant sigh.

A cheerful looking woman with a big bow tie, who sits to our right, nods her head as if Hera had addressed her. "It's a bit crowded isn't it?" she says. We nod back amiably.

I would like to rest against Hera, but she might think I'm attracted to her in that way. I just want us to be friends.

"If this is truth-telling time," she whispers so the woman next to us can't hear, "I'll confess something to you. But promise me you won't make me do twenty stations of the cross."

"I won't, Hera. I won't even give you twenty lashings with a wet noodle."

She must come from a Catholic home; a Protestant would have said, "Promise me you won't lock me up in the basement."

"Oh, you are a gentle confessor, sweetheart," she mocks. I can almost see tension spill out of her as she settles into her seat, and says, "So I'll tell you that every time I see you standing up here, playing and singing your music like the Goddess herself had appeared, I feel first embarrassed and then challenged. I feel that the way you show complete strangers your emotions and make yourself so vulnerable challenges me to be more open too. But, you know, I'm kind of the Joan of Arc type. If I don't wear the pants in *my* family, who will? Even though men are threatened by my size, it's my jeans and flannel shirts that really put them off and that's what I like."

"Hera, Joan of Arc was murdered. It didn't seem to help her any that she wore men's clothes. They just hated her even more. They had to murder her because she was a powerful woman and a powerful force. Frankly, I don't think it matters what women wear. Obviously, it's the body language you use with men that attracts or puts them off. Maybe you ought to disguise yourself and wear long skirts like I do." She's not impressed when I fluff up my skirt for her.

"What do you want to be? A sacrificial lamb?"

"No. People are complex. You can't put yourself in a straight jacket."

"A dyke can never put herself in a straight jacket. Look, Bird, we have different approaches that's all. I wear armor and you probably wear an amulet. But who knows? Maybe under your poetical shoulders are sharp shoulder blades."

I try to think of a clever comeback.

"I need air quick!" she says. Is she playing with me? No, she seems to be having trouble breathing. "You witches and your cats," she gasps. "All they do for me is make me sick. I must get air...." She breaks off and lunges out of her seat, then forces her way through a wall of women.

It takes me several minutes to find her outside the swinging wooden doors, sucking on an atomizer.

I take deep gulps of the night air as if somehow that will help her breathe normally again. When finally her breaths are regular, she points out a new moon peering over the tops of trees.

"Okay, so what's your story?" she asks, obliquely.

"Are you all right now? Was that caused by cat hairs or what we were talking about?"

"Both. It's okay, baby. You can't be on top of everything. I'm all right now. What were you saying about people being complex?"

"That's what I said. People are complex. And since you guessed about my amulet, here, look at it." I feel for the crystal I wear around my neck hidden under my blouse. "How did you know I wear one? See, it breaks up light. Light comes in, moves around and then goes on its way. And since I tend to hold on too long to painful experiences, I thought it might help me."

"Does it work?" she asks, peering at the small crystal with some curiosity.

"It reminds me that I can absorb my experiences, learn from them and then let them go, just as the crystal takes in light and lets it pass on."

"I dig the way you work with objects, Bird. You put magic power into them. You could make a mint helping people decide what their power object was. But this is nice." She releases the small stone and it raps my collar bone.

"Hey," I say, "that hurts."

"Now be honest," she whispers, pulled into her own thoughts. "Do you think I'm a phony? Is that what you've been trying to tell me all evening?" She actually looks sinister to me right now as she continues. "Look, forget about your symbolic necklaces. You gotta be tough. Better believe my manners keep a lot of nasty people away. And you, you seem fragile as a flower. It's quite tempting to rip your petals apart. You won't last long, sweetie!"

"Hera, you're really something else. I was just beginning to trust you. I'm not all that open really. I've got some sense of self-protection, after all. I just like gentle people. Do you know what I really think? I think you don't trust me because I don't dress all the time like a tough dyke. You don't think I'm a real lesbian, do you?"

"Let's talk about it over a real cold beer. We can go to the top

deck and smell the rotten Hudson."

"Yah, let's get out of here," I sigh. I really don't like the way she keeps me on the defensive. "Hey, Hera," I shout at the large body moving away from me, "Why don't you imagine that the Hudson is filled with fish, turtles and clean water, just tonight?"

"For you, anything," she calls back. "But just for tonight. Tomorrow I'm meeting with *Women Stop Pollution.*"

She leads us up a series of wooden steps towards the second deck. "Tonight we can imagine what this river used to be like and what it's going to be like again in the future," she says.

What if I slip away from the boat for a while, forget the tangy smell of water, the nippy pleasure of cold beer, Hera's intense eyes, her bravado and go back a few hours to Mari? I want to make love with her again. I want to watch rough, orange cloth slip away again from her shoulders. I want to watch her full lips purse for my pleasure. She does not ask me to undress her; she is eager.

Her breasts are larger, fuller than mine. Her body is less angular. The lips of her vagina are more subtle. She is a rose. I am an orchid.

Can I really find those precious caresses, those whispers, the love words rooted in my memory? Can I feel her tongue again, thrusting inside me, making me swell with excitement? Can I taste the liquid from her sacred mouth? Can I remember what it was like for me to feel the touch of another woman's small hands, child hands, bird hands, bone hands on my sex?

I will spread my body on hers again. I will touch her soft, wet spots, the places she allows lovers to touch, but not herself—obedient still to those old chastisements. I will not let stern faces interrupt our pleasure.

My hand is at her entrance. My nose welcomes the rush of fragrant odors. My fingers enter her. They are held by her labial folds.

Let the language of my hands thrill her again. Let my tongue discover the softness of her neck, the precious crevices under her arms, the weight of each breast, the tips of her fingers, the

sensitive places between her toes. When my tongue meets hers we laugh recklessly and I let my weight rest into her for the first time.

Now Mari calls me to her. The beast in her groans. She nips my cheeks, my nose. She growls in my ear.

I throw my arms around her and hug her so hard my muscles ache. The joy in having someone to love is intoxicating. I growl back and sit on her mound of wiry hair. I spread open my lower lips. She does too. We caress each other. Is this the tenderness I have been told will drive me mad? Forget other people's fears now. Be sexual for her, with her.

Our bodies move in long, slow arcing waves. I am rowing back and forth with her. We arch and bend until our clitorises flame. Then skillfully she moves under me until her tongue is on my vagina. I rise up on my knees so she can move under me with ease. She kisses my inner lips and enters the chamber of my uterus with her fingers. She is skilled at touching.

She is making me feel immensely organic, immensely alive.

I am sensation. I am butterfly fluttering to her sweet tongue. I am colors and scents. I am flower all open. I am expanding liquid. I am waves rocking Mari. I am coming.

I feel for the bone around her neck telling me she is from the Land of Pampa. I feel for the tiny beads around her ankle telling me she is wedded to herself. We are not getting married, we are making love. Her loveliness wants mine. Her passion is affirmed by mine. We both long to be met as well as to be seen.

She lies back and I take over. My mouth is in her wetness, her flesh. I suck her throbbing vulva and bring her to orgasm and then another until she and I blend into another organic flowering. I pull the sheet over us as she wraps her limbs about my wet body. Our blending takes us into a peaceful and deep sleep.

Water is slapping on freshly painted wood. Bubbles of white paint overlap green trim. On the lower deck I feel the engine of the boat purr through my feet, ankles, knees, thighs, hips as though I were riding the back of a great cat. Val, Grace, Irene and I are devouring chunks of Vermont cheddar, peaches and

sourdough bread between sips of cold grape juice. They don't drink any more. Hera is off somewhere finding recruits for her ecology meeting; she wasn't joking after all.

Val runs an advertising agency. She is short, pugnacious, vibrant and unfortunately, at odds with me. We were once lovers. I left her for Audrey because she was always criticizing me. I sang too loudly. Dressed too casually. I didn't set the table correctly. When even our lovemaking became a source of tension I left her. Now Val is living with Grace.

Grace and I worked in a women's ritual theater group together during the early 70 s. That was before she became a therapist. She is easygoing, artistic, and predictable, all that Val admires. Grace only seems predictable though, just as I seem unpredictable. They share the language of amibitious professional women. Grace's wholesomeness offers a resting place for Val's anxieties. I watch them enjoy each other in a way that Val and I never did. Their differences seem to enrich their companionship.

Irene is a close friend to both of them. I know her from the Teahouse. I often wonder how a beautiful woman like Irene— a kind of Bette Davis and Lauren Becall blend— ends up working for so little pay when she could have had a lucrative career as a model. I wonder that and then I laugh. She's not the only one who didn't choose a lucrative career!

I am fascinated by the way Irene rotates her attention skillfully between Val and Grace, accommodating both women. They seem to need her to round out the polarizing tendency in coupling. I imagine her being the spirit breath that joins them. I guess she needs them to fill out her shape too.

Though they are friendly and share their food with me, I feel tense in their presence. Lonely. An outsider. They appear to be more at ease now about their lives than I feel. I guess I will always be grappling with mine. Sudden awkwardnesses in speaking come upon me. I stumble, change words around and mix up facts. When Val describes me to the others as a 'creativeholic,' they laugh— at me, rather than with me, I suspect. Of course, she still needs to hurt me, just as I hurt her once. I would not

give up my friendship with Josh and that made her doubt my love for her. Though she asks how my music is coming along, she never comes to my concerts any more. We never found a way to enjoy our differences.

Val and Grace are describing their trip to the Caribbean.

I think immediately, how sad that people have to slave at their jobs all year for the brief pleasure and reward of two weeks of sand, sun, and water. Irene acts fascinated, but I feel uncomfortable even with her humorous accounts of what happens to English ladies when they drink rum and romp with the 'natives.'

Suddenly I feel a twinge in my chest. I miss Mari terribly. Why isn't she here with me?

Because, Judith, you made the decision to come without her.

Because I really don't want her to be an exotic, intoxicating creature for me.

Judith, maybe you should tell someone here about her. Make her more real.

I think about her words to me. "How could you leaves me now like a pees of shit, after we make love?" Her legs were wrapped around me; her voice cut me like a knife. "You are cruel, Norte Americana. Maybe I won't be here when you come back."

She and I won't have a chance to work out any complexities between us. Mari's home is on the other side of the world. In Argentina. She is in this country for only a few months. I don't want to get hurt.

Just keep breathing deeply.

You can get through this!

I excuse myself from the three women. I need to be alone to breathe deeply.

On the deck I am surrounded by strangers. Moonlight brushes their shapes and casts strange shadows on the white walls of the boat. I can feel its cool heat. I sit down on one of the benches. Women are huddled all around me in small groups, inspiring each other with news and stories. Slow music pulses from the doorway leading to the dance area. I start to sway with the beat.

Close my eyes. Let myself go into the rocking of the music, the rocking of the boat.

As I begin to relax, snatches of the conversation with Val, Irene and Grace come to mind. But I want to forget them. Just be alone with myself.

In the distance two voices blur into the sounds of the motor; behind my closed eyelids the voices swoop back and forth like a pair of seagulls dipping into the water. "I don't know if I should tell you this but I think I am in love with you." This voice is hushed and slightly apologetic. I imagine the speaker performing a mothering gesture one does to show tenderness, perhaps brushing stray hairs from the other's cheek. What a perfect night to declare new love.

"But you can't be," the other voice responds nervously. "It will ruin everything." The voice hardens. "In fact, we won't be able to see each other again if you are." The voices seem familiar.

The second woman continues anxiously. "I don't want to lose what we do have."

"It was tearing me up not to tell you." The first woman speaks again, her voice rough, insistent. "It frightens you, dear? Is it so terrible? You can't keep me from being in love, you know. I tried to talk myself out of it, believe me I did. Listen, do you think I need to mess up a nice friendship and a solid relationship by falling in love with you? I think of you all the time."

The second woman moans, "Oh, my Goddess," then is silent.

"Your face haunts me," her admirer replies. "I want to touch you, kiss you...."

"No, we can't," is the panicked response. "She's coming back any moment now. She would die. I love you both so much. I don't want this. A threesome is not my cup of tea. Please, this is impossible. She would be so hurt."

After a pause a voice cries, "What's so wrong with loving you?"

Their voices mix with the faraway sounds of plaintive music. The words, "she would be so hurt," go by me again, printed on a page in Helvetica style like the typeface I use at work. I open

my eyes.

Did I dream the conversation?

A rush of electricity shoots through me. Ahead and to the right of me, partly hidden by two young dykes rubbing together like birches in the wind, Grace and Irene sit, tense, solemn. Where is Val? Grace is declaring her love for Irene. Funny how I didn't recognize them immediately. And how can I hear them at this distance? My mind must be a shortwave radio.

Grace is articulating unnameable, unspeakable longings for Irene. I want to hide. I don't want to know this. Must I tell Val? Protect her? She won't be able to take it. She made me her confidant in her relationship with Grace. Earlier, she had pulled me aside as she offered me a glass of juice. "At last I'm married, Judith," she whispered. "Grace and I love each other so much."

I had looked at her hard and squeezed her hand. I knew her reason for saying this to me held angry emotions. She was also saying, "See, Judith, Grace loves me as you could not." I am both her enemy and her friend. I know her deepest longings.

I don't want to be here. I don't want to know this. I want to be on a pleasure trip.

I decide to walk about the boat. What if we were on a long journey together? The weight of so many souls would be tiring. Imagine what immigrants felt, shoved together like cattle, yet fed by dreams. Better to be on a sailboat with a few close friends.

My concern for Val's welfare lifts. I will approach whomever I am attracted to and talk to them. I can begin simply by asking, "Are you enjoying the boat ride?"

I watch the tree-lined shore slip by. Everything is moving: myself, the boat, the river, the cars inching along the highway above the river. The people in the cars are talking, gesturing, lighting a cigarette, lifting a handkerchief to a nose. The earth underneath is in motion. I want always to connect to this natural state of fluidity, transformation.

I know that being clamped to a desk in one of the billion small offices in the city is not reality. The rectangular rooms and buildings with corners which break up flowing movements, the ugly chairs and plastic plants which flatten the imagination seem

now to have purposely been constructed to limit the universe of motion, of change. The self-conscious swirl of social activities, the bustle in places for consuming culture and food serve to dull me and prevent me from realizing that I live and ride on a sphere revolving in the universe. The highest skyscraper in the world, the latest hairdo, the fanciest dinner, the most sophisticated thought won't alter my short, definite mortality, nor will it keep me from seeing the destruction all around me. The nuclear weapons, the radioactive wastes, the chemical dumps, the acid rain which flood my world are threatening our natural cycles. We are not being allowed to live or die naturally.

A thought I wrote in my journal the day before comes to mind. *You yourself become a boat. Hug the waves. Move through water. And carry in you others who have the inclination to ride.*

Of course, 500 lesbians want to walk on water. Five hundred flat, round stones skip down the Hudson on the liquid flow of water. I touch water for the water touches me; everywhere water embraces me. Finding myself in the thought of water, I begin to breathe deeply again from my center.

Ahead, a particular motion attracts my eyes. A figure bends and lifts a trap door in the floor. The person peers down, apparently checking for something. I am struck by the realization that the person is not a woman, but a man. I experience a momentary fright, a desire to warn others. "Help. Man on board!" What is a man doing here? My breathing quickens, my muscles tense. Then I understand. Certainly men are on board. They are 'manning' the boat. We are only renters, legitimate trespassers for four hours. We had to hire a crew. Is it unusual that the workers are men? No.

On his haunches, he searches, gropes and picks up an object invisible to me. Having done this he closes the trap door, rises and walks to the railing to light a cigarette. My attention moves from him to my own thoughts once more. Automatically presuming he is married, I wonder what he will say to his wife tonight. Will he make up dirty stories about lesbians to humor her, jokes which actually degrade and falsify us, and her? Will

she laugh with him? If so, will it be from boredom, ignorance, fear? Will his jokes make an annoying ache that lingers? Does it excite him to be on a ship with 500 women? Perhaps it would not if he knew that some would just as soon see him dead as alive.

Thoughts like these are rippled by the appearance of another figure. A tough dyke in a black motorcycle jacket and tight blue jeans walks toward the workman. What a duo! The woman is probably as tough as that boat mechanic thinks he is. The man's strength is assumed; the woman's has been obtained through struggle. Two creatures within a few feet of each other and yet centuries apart in comprehension of the other, centuries away from a common language.

To my amazement, the woman stops by the man and asks him for a light. Perhaps she's an organizer of the event and has to work out practicalities with the crew. Or maybe there's a maintenance problem; the sound system broke; they ran out of ice in the bar. There could be any number of reasons why she would need to talk to him. I watch them closely and try to read their gestures. Why does the man take off his cap and run his fingers through his hair? Why does she stick both of her hands in her jeans pockets and keep the cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth? Why does he keep looking away from her when she talks? Is he threatened by her? She does none of the things that he must expect women to do—smile and bat their eyes.

Batting one's eyes is such a strange gesture, possibly a manifestation of nervousness, though interpreted by men as flirtation and a sign that the woman willingly courts the man's attention. I watch women flutter eyelashes when they sense danger, as birds ruffle feathers and porcupines raise quills.

I am sure the woman in front of me is not batting her eyes at that man at all. Now he flicks the cigarette butt into the water and spits into his hands, rubbing them together. The woman has not removed her eyes from him the whole time. She seems on guard for any aggressive gesture on his part.

Then something unbelieveable happens. She moves up to

him and seems to whisper in his ear. He looks quickly from side to side to see if anyone is watching, so I, with the quickness of a fox, step back further into the shadow cast by the upper deck. I sense danger. With the deftness of a cop reaching for his gun, the man reaches into his shirt pocket under his blue jacket, retrieves some object which I can't see, gives it to her then draws his hand across the front of her pants and for one second caresses the area between her legs. I see her head arch back, not with anger but passivity. Then she steps back, turns away from him having already pocketed the object given to her and walks quickly away, cigarette still dangling from her mouth. He moves back to the side of the boat, places both hands on the railing and looks again, side to side to see if anyone is watching.

My heart beats rapidly. I don't know what to make of what I've seen. It happened so quickly. I wonder. Has moonlight painted innocent actions with frightening shades and inspired me to conjure up a furtive and unmentionable scene? Has sexual tension and chaos from the dance floor set off an image of heterosexual intrigue, unleashed an image lurking in my own mind? Did they know each other? What is it they exchanged? Drugs? Jewels? Money? And the familiar sexual gesture. I am baffled. I want to move away quickly as my instinct for survival tells me that if that man sees me, I will be in trouble.

Borrowing the deer's agility I slip away until I come to the swinging doors leading into a large room with rows of seats where several women talk together in small groups. Relieved, I move quickly through them and head for the far side of the room to a bench where two friendly-looking women sit. I need warmth and welcome. I nestle in near them, closing my eyes to steady myself.

The scene I just witnessed has etched itself in my mind as does an object that you have stared at for a long time. I don't resist watching a replay, but I feel a strong need to change the characters.

I imagine that the boatman who I had understood so completely as a man by his every gesture was in fact a woman. A woman so skilled in interpreting mannerisms of men that she

has passed herself off as one of them in order to be hired by the boat union or whatever union hires the maintenance crew. She can hide her curves and female parts beneath the coarse flat lines of the worker's uniform. She can hide her vulnerability and emotions inside practical gestures and considerations needed for the mechanical operations of boat maintenance. She can earn a decent living by posing as a man and she is protected by the male persona she carries around with her. Maybe Hera is right. Women who pose as men are safer.

But then the other one? That person whose body bent back in momentary passionate response? She is the lover who has joined the lesbian boat ride to rendevous with her sweetheart. The familiarity of their encounter calls up animals who have bared their necks to each other in surrender and trust. And the mysterious object passed between them could have been something as commonplace as an aspirin, chewing gum, a tampax, some necessary item the one had stored in her bag or tool kit locked in the hatch. Only the moonlight and my active mind, prone to find intrigue even in ordinary transactions, would invent a drama of stolen rubies, counterfeit money. Once again my imagination has been activated on the boat ride.

I'm aware of the hard wooden bench beneath me. Its solidness is comforting. I feel the dampness in the air. The beer I had with Hera has made me drowsy. I would like to curl up near a warm body and sleep for a while. The objects around me rearrange themselves.

The ship becomes a house, that gray wooden house; the bench across from me becomes its steps, painted rose like a mouth. Posts along the deck become sturdy pines and pliant birch. They fall into position beside the house. Let the door of the house swing open—I will resist entering it this time.

I am sucked back to the summer before Mari came into my life when my emotions were being tugged this way and that like clothes on a line pinned up against the wind. Will I find a clue to the reason her entrance into my life seemed so right? I will crouch in the slender grasses beside the one oak tree, which pierces the sky like a mast; I will be rooted solidly, a safe dis-

tance from Dolphin's home, the grayed New England house I see so clearly again.

* * *

Dolphin has sleek black hair and soft brown eyes, ineffable as a doe's eyes. But it is the way she clenches her jaw that I will always remember. I can tell when things aren't going well for her; the muscles in her jaw work continually—that's when I feel my heart go out to her the most.

I have arrived earlier than expected to pick up my belongings. She asked me to move out of the house the week before, but I needed some time with an old friend before I could go through with her request.

The mosquitoes and I wait for her blue station wagon to enter the driveway. We keep cool in the shadow of the oak tree. Will I witness her walk through the front door alone, without me? Then will I enter and tell her I have come to pack?

Her ex-husband insisted that she not live with me. If she does not comply with this command, he will reduce alimony and take her to court as an unfit mother. They have been divorced for five years.

Since the earnings from her two part-time teaching jobs are small, she needs the steady sum of money coming in every month from him to support her family. Facing the issue in court is a luxury Dolphin cannot afford, nor is she prepared emotionally to do battle in this public way. His threats cause many of her fears to flare: she will be labelled *queer*; her children, John and Sue, will be harassed at their school; she will be fired from her teaching job; her parents will stop talking to her. All of these fears are based in reality.

Although she is aware that I have come out publicly as a lesbian in the women's community, she feels neither comfortable nor safe with me. And being sexually attracted to me because of my courage is not stable enough grounds to hold us together during this trying time. I am also unused to the problems involved in childrearing when one's sexual preference is not acceptable in the community. As more and more people in the small town where we live begin to stare and whisper at us in

public places, I too feel uncomfortable and frightened.

She eagerly makes love with me but will not let me sleep with her. I feel both used and abandoned. She thought I would bring her release and be a doorway into an easier life. I thought we could make a home together and share the care of her children.

Though she assures me that if she had no children, she would be marching in the forefront of the feminist movement, my outspoken views make her wince. In her presence I begin to feel like a flashing neon sign, heralding lesbianism. I understand her discomfort around some of my actions; she is right, rose-colored front steps do draw attention to themselves—I was trying to help her fix up the steps *gaily*—but rose steps do not bespeak homosexuality.

I never expected our relationship to be blessed by the mayor, Mr. Hoffman, or the Lutheran minister, Reverend Krinsky; still I had hoped for some peace of mind.

I am not her first woman lover. When we met the year before at the dinner party of a mutual friend, she had recently separated from June, the woman she had lived with for several years after separating from George. I was not plucking a spring chicken. She had strong, complicated needs and a gnawing impulse to make her own meanings. Inspired stories appeared on her desk regularly. She smiled coyly whenever I asked her about them.

Gradually I learn that George had accepted June as a companion for Dolphin. He believed they shared karma. And since they kept the nature of their relationship hidden, both to the community and to themselves—they never used the word *lesbian,* but, then, maybe they never made love—there was no cause for alarm. The time I met them, their shared karma was shot through with resentment, anger and boredom.

Dophin reached out to me first during this period of separation—I reached back. We both needed to love and to touch whether we shared karma or not. We both needed adult companionship. Though June was absent during our weeks together, her presence remained. I see now that new lovers ought to find new places to share. They had lived together in the same gray farmhouse that Dolphin had shared with George. When the go-

ing got extremely rough between Dolphin and me, I dreamt she ran back to the familiar body of her past companion, offering the new lovemaking techniques she and I had explored.

With so many elements against us, it is understandable that we could not distinguish our problems clearly. Which were caused by the homophobia around us, which by the homophobia within ourselves? Finally I understood. She was being consumed by the fear of loss of her children and I could not comfort or help her. There was nothing else for me to do but leave her. That act alone could bring some peace in our lives. Of course, I felt angry and hurt.

As I dig into welcoming earth by the oak tree, needing to feel connected to something else alive, the sound of a car alerts me. A second car follows. I look through the grass and see Dolphin get out of her blue car. I see June emerge from her white one. They walk together arm in arm to the house. At the foot of the front porch steps they stop.

Dolphin points to the fresh paint. "Judith painted these. Isn't she funny?" She tries to laugh lightly, but sighs instead.

They enter the house together.

Waves of turbulent emotions run through me. What should I do? Shout at them from my hiding place? Get in my car and leave before she knows I am here? Leave all of my things behind in her house? Let her deal with my mementos as I have had to deal with the leftovers of others?

Or should I get a stick, run in there and give them both raps on the shoulder? Wake up! Wake up! This is just a rotten nightmare. Sisterhood really is powerful and we can help each other.

Or perhaps I should claim Dolphin. But that's ridiculous. She doesn't want to be with me. She can't be with me.

I slowly walk into the house and join them in the kitchen. "Hello," I hear my voice say.

They both turn simultaneously and look at me as if I were a ghost. They look through me, around me, anywhere but at me.

"When did you come back?" Dolphin's voice shakes. "I didn't see your car."

June remains tight-lipped. She will reveal nothing.

"I came back to get my belongings." I speak in a small tight voice. It sounds like my father's voice.

"June and I are talking, Judith." Dolphin seems tiny, as if far away. She doesn't invite me to sit with them.

I turn around and walk to "my room," the room that no longer is mine, the room in which Dolphin and June had slept and embraced before I knew her. I begin to pack my things.

"I'm sorry," a distant voice says.

"For what?" My own voice replies.

My eyes are clouded and I can hardly make out the objects I am packing. I can hardly see the shape in the doorway. I turn away from Dolphin for I cannot bear to be near her. I cannot bear to think about her any more.

I will return to the river, to the boat and to the happier memory of the healing lovemaking Mari and I share.

* * *

I float through smoke and conversations to the women's room of the Hudson River boat, looking forward to a few moments by myself on the toilet. My hands feel for the purple skirt; it is still there. And so is the small comb I tucked in its pocket.

At least ten women are waiting, not too patiently, in line. Some look for themselves in the row of mirrors. Others continue conversations started on the dance floor, or on deck in the moonlight. Those who want a quiet moment with themselves are looking through their bags and pockets searching for something to occupy their attention. Everyone is busy assuring the others they are not there to cruise.

I am among those trying to see myself in the mirror. A woman seated in front of me in a drab chair blocks my attempts. She is familiar. Do I know her or does she remind me of someone? Her jacket catches my attention, a black leather jacket with a spirited dragon sewn on it. Her pants are skin tight.

I know her! She is the woman I saw a half hour before in a strange confrontation on deck with her lover. I smile in recognition. I can see her face quite clearly despite the smudges on the mirror. She is so engrossed with her ritual that I need not fear

being noticed by her.

She removes a small leather pouch tied to her belt and retrieves first a comb, then a lipstick and a small perfume atomizer. A bike dyke with cosmetics is intriguing. We both dressed up for this boat ride. We are sister performers. A veil of moonlight had hidden her mask. How carefully she applies the delicate shade to her lips then moves them back and forth before blotting them with a tissue. When she sprays perfume behind each ear, the room is filled with the scent of lilac.

Someone behind me nudges me forward. I must keep my eyes on that woman in the mirror. She picks up a small yellow comb and draws it through her hair carefully. Blond curls about three inches long resist the teeth. She pulls the comb with one hand and holds onto her head with the other. Her mouth twists with concentration. When she pulls the comb through her hair again, I see she is wearing a wig. The comb has caught in the synthetic hairs, jarring the wig aside. I see short, black hairs, side-burns and a barely visible stubble of beard. Her face is heavily powdered.

I gasp, push into the toilet just vacated by a short-cropped woman in a smart suit and sit down heavily on the seat. That woman, the tough lesbian in a motorcycle jacket and snug blue jeans is a man! A man parading as a woman. So the boatman he met on deck is a man too, I guess. I don't really know any more. Whether they are men or women or a combination of both, there is no doubt that they are lovers. Should I tell someone there's a man in the women's room?

The boat to Bear Mountain returns on schedule to the Manhattan docks. A lot of money was raised for the Lesbian Cultural Center. I'm sure that several women made plans to meet for dinner the next week, that handfuls fell in love, clusters had important talks they couldn't have in more mundane environments. Though we all still have to walk the hard streets of the city again, we feel inspired to continue our struggles, our endeavors. Small changes have taken place, and some large ones too! Besides, moving on water is always restful.

I walk down the gangplank laughing with Robin. She says she

had fantasized falling overboard and being rescued by a rich woman in a helicopter.

One of the men in the boat crew points me out to his buddy as we walk down the pier. "Look at that one," he roars. "She's wearing a skirt."

I look away from him and think of Mari asleep in my room, waiting for me to come home. I am glad to be a woman loving her, another woman.

* * *

Miercoles 3 de febrero en la Siriri Arroyo

Our beloved sweet terrible bird tree aerolito human, Judith, mi pequeña.

On the long night I think you. I touch you in each little rencle of my hand. I dream you in my hair where still your hands dance. The bonne-stone, the rock-fish, all the time talk me about you. On the long morning with a pale sun walking slow, now, into the room and making at front my eye the gold little spots of your eyes. I tryt to jump against the English language for to tell you about me.

I miss the informal aspects of the people of your country. The easy smile. The dirty snack bars, and some kind of energy that still is alive there. Also, I begin to feel that I'm talking alone too much about feminist awareness. The majority of men smile sarcastly. The feminist are "the women with problems" and the women in general seem they look to me like if I would be alittle crazy. Of course, I hardly can to talk about it at all, but when I do it seem like I were foreign.

I have still problems of communication because the structure of the English language it is inside my head.

I miss that horrible and imperialist country that is your country, with much beautiful people inside and pigeons and squirrels and cockroach. The last year I understood that all generalization is false, and that America is only one in many ways. I love you my little rabbit.

Judith, mi pequeña, corazon de oro tatuado en mis manos, yo te amo y te amo, y la distancia y el tiempo parecen hechos de

una materia tan sutil, tan transparente, que te puedo tener a traves de ellos, intacta, en el mio cuore.

A woodpecker works on a giant tree so near to me. There is a lot of birds, blue and yellow and black coming here these days from I don't know where. Times ago I wrote you a couple of letters you seemed not receive. I listen again and again the cassets of that beautiful, strange, painful song with the voice of waters, the sound of footsteps.

I made a long silent where I didn't write you and other friends. I had a lot of problems and work. My health was not so good and a hard winter I hope will soon finish. But specially I did not wrote you because I cannot answer the beautifulness of all your feelings and questions. I'm here and I will be here yet. I don't know for how long.

There is four months I'm working on translations. Now the book is almost ready. In two weeks more I will give the book to a publisher that have some interest.

Slowly I'm going on with my guitar, Torcaza and with life. Something is doing a music inside me, like inside trees, animals and stones. But I seem to struggle against that. I get upset and sad too much often.

I stopped working for the magazine because the male chauvinisit and commercial mentality they finally showed me.

Where will be you now, love? In which landscape and in which body? Summer making its road there. A hot sun through which you will be swimming. Give my strong love to Josh. Judith, you and me will rebirth again and again like my land, like the seasons, because there is a road and we need to walk together.

Te abrazo fuerte me querida. You will never vanish from my heart.

Mari